

MY LIVED EXPERIENCE INSIGHTS OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

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INSIGHT EXCHANGE

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Insight Exchange centres on the expertise of people with lived experiences of violence and gives voice to these experiences. It is designed to inform and strengthen social, service and systemic responses to domestic and family violence

The insight component of [Insight Exchange](http://www.insightexchange.net) shares a person's **lived experience** of violence and abuse, highlighting a person's responses and resistance to violence and where '**social responses**' were helpful, unhelpful or harmful. This reveals the roles that individuals, organisations and communities play in people's experience of violence.

Alex has shared some of her experiences, insights and reflections, mapped against questions and focus areas explored in the Insight Exchange **My Safety Kit** resource.

My Safety Kit - is a reflection resource that speaks in the voice of the reader who may be reflecting on their own relationships and (possible) experiences of domestic and family violence.

What did I hope for and what is going on in this relationship?

I met Dan when I was in uni, in my early 20s. He worked at the cafe near where I worked. He was very attentive, very romantic, and pursued the relationship for a few months before I went out with him. I always blamed myself for a lot of the things that happened. My background was that I had had an abusive father and I'd also been sexually assaulted in my first year of uni.

I remember when I told Dan about the sexual assault I'd experienced; we'd been dating for quite a long time before I told him. He cried, and he said, "I'm never going to let that happen to you again, I'm never going to let anyone touch you again." At the time when he said it, I thought that it was the most romantic response and I thought he must love me.

But then it started getting to the stage where I wasn't allowed to catch the bus home or I wasn't allowed to walk anywhere at night, so like to walk from my class to the bus stop, for example. He would pick me up from everywhere and drive me. To begin with I thought it was really romantic that he wanted to be with me all the time. That's a massive time investment to want to pick someone up every day.

During our relationship, I went to England on a student exchange. When I was in the UK, we had a relationship over the phone. We still spoke every day, but I had started to have a lot of doubts by that stage.

RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHOICES

I am wondering about some things... Are my rights and boundaries respected? Can I safely talk about what I am and am not comfortable with?

I was really ashamed of my past and what I had brought to the relationship and I felt I was really lucky that he still wanted to be with me despite what I'd been through. It meant that whenever he said, "I didn't hurt you, you just see abuse everywhere," or if there were times where he hurt me during sex, or if I was asleep and he did it, then I would say, "that's not okay" and he would say, "well, you just see rape everywhere." I believed him. I didn't speak to anyone about it.

PARTICIPATION

"My opportunity to participate, have a voice and be involved as a citizen, in the community and in my family, may be limited."

My ex was quite possessive and just very jealous. He didn't like me having friendships outside of the relationship, which to begin with, just meant that he didn't want me to do group projects at uni with other males. It started out that it was just males.

He would say things like, "I'm trying to protect you," and "you just don't understand that this is what men are like, and that they are looking at you in a sexual way, and I'm protecting you." To begin with I accepted it. Once you'd accepted it a few times it's very hard to know where to draw the line. To begin

with it might be okay that he's saying that about a guy that you don't even know that goes to your uni that you're doing a group project with. But when that started to extend to my friends and my family it got a bit harder. I have a lot of very close male friends and he started to be very jealous of them, and to say, "well, I think that they have feelings for you and I don't want you to spend time with them."

He'd do things around them to make them really uncomfortable as well, so make comments about our relationship, or make it very clear that it was inappropriate for them to be friends with me.

With some of them he was just very aggressive, just in the way that he spoke to them. Just to make the situation uncomfortable.

What kinds of things am I having to do to enable my safe participation in society, community and family?

I tried to explain to him that I had to do a group project with this person. Then he would insist that he'd be there or that he be able to meet the guys that I was working with or things like that, which was difficult. It got to the stage in the end where I wouldn't tell him if I had a group project with a guy. I would just say that they were girls or not talk about the people that I had courses with.

I just got quite worn down with it. I didn't know how to make the situation less awkward. I felt like it was my fault because I'd put him in this situation. For instance, one of my male friends I dated when I was 17. My friend and I went on a few dates, became best friends, we've been best friends ever since. I always put it back onto me and thought, well, maybe that was really uncomfortable for my partner to be in that situation. It got to the stage where I didn't hang out with that friend anymore. We didn't speak for the year that I was together with Dan.

Who knows about my circumstances, and supports my responses?

I got a lot of responses from people that I worked with and people at uni. Particularly the guy with the group project. We were doing the group project. We were at uni, but then we'd walked together to lunch or something. Dan saw us and he ran out and put his arm around me and said to the guy, like, "this is my girl." He was, like, "what is with your boyfriend?"

People at work, a lot of them made comments the whole way through. Because he was very jealous of other men that I worked with, who weren't even in my team, they were just in the same building as me. He would insist on coming to pick me up from work every day, or coming to stand outside my work when I finished to make sure that they weren't trying to talk to me. I got a few comments about that as well. Mainly it would be like, "your boyfriend is a bit crazy." I didn't know how to take it at the time.

I also knew his first serious girlfriend and she'd told me about this ex that she'd had that stalked her when they broke up, and I remember being, like, "that's awful." When I made the connection that it was him, I was thinking he was young and stupid when that had happened. I knew that Dan had some issues and I always just thought I needed to support him and that he'd gone through

some stuff. That I needed to be there for him and that he was getting better, like he wasn't going to do that always.

I think my parent's relationship influenced my thinking. My dad was forcibly removed from the house and my mum always resented that. She spoke of it as though her agency was taken away from her and she felt powerless in the situation. She always believed he loved her, that he was only abusive because of his depression and that she could have "fixed him," given the chance. And she thought Dan and I could get through our "problems" too. I think I thought I had that chance: That I was strong enough to make it work. I wanted to make it work.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

"My body and mind suffer from the violence and coercion. I can become physically unwell, fearful, desperate, lonely, sad, and angry. Although my despair is one form of resistance to the violence, I may be seen as 'clinically depressed' or as having another disorder.

"My feelings are ethical emotional responses to violence."

Dan had decided that he wanted to travel over to the UK to see me. He had a lot of trouble getting into the country because it came out that he had a criminal record, which he hadn't told me about. Anyway, he got a lawyer to help him get his visa. And he did get it. He flew to England to see me after I'd been there for six months. I told my best friend I was worried about him coming. I said that I felt very nervous, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to share a room with him. She thought that that was due to my past, that I was just getting cold feet and getting anxious about it.

But from the second that Dan arrived, really, I was really sick. I had really bad digestive problems. I couldn't eat. I wasn't eating much and looking back, I was probably starving myself, but whenever I did eat, I would vomit. It wasn't that I was forcing myself to vomit but a couple of hours later my body would just reject the food. I had incredibly severe diarrhoea, but it was just water because I wasn't eating. I thought that if I got sick enough, maybe they'd fly me home. It got to the stage where Dan was convinced that I wasn't really sick and it was all in my head. He said that if I went home that it meant I didn't love him and that I was bailing on the relationship.

What kinds of things am I having to do, or not do, for my physical and mental health?

I just got sicker and sicker and he didn't want me to go to a doctor. He was convinced that I was faking being sick because I didn't want to be with him anymore. It ended up we got onto a cruise ship. I remember to get onto the cruise ship you have to sign a declaration to say that you're not sick. He was like, you need to say that you're not sick. And I was, like, "well, that's lying, I'm not doing that." I did tick the box to say that I was sick and they still let me on the cruise. I remember thinking and hoping that I wouldn't be able to go and I'd be able to go home.

I got on the cruise and I was really sick. By this stage I hadn't had food go through me in two and a half weeks. I remember feeling so dizzy and my sight going. Dan was out of the room, at the casino or something, and the cleaner had come in and she asked if I was okay. I was, like, no, I actually think I'm going to die. It feels like the most horrific hangover and the whole room is spinning. She took me down to the doctor on the ship and I started vomiting straight away when I got there.

The nurses asked, "when was the last time I ate?" I was, like, "I don't even know, I can't even tell you." By this stage I was 43 kilos, looked an absolute mess. They took me off the ship and into an ambulance, to a hospital, and just had to pump me full of drugs. They were, like, we don't know what's wrong with you. None of the tests are coming back with anything.

Who understands I am not "ill" but suffering from violence?

In the end they let me go and so we finished up our holiday, which we only had a week left. When I got home they never figured out what was wrong either, so they just assumed it was stress related because it eventually got better.

Now I've left, it's very obvious to me that it was a response to the abuse because whenever I hear from Dan, which is sporadically, I immediately get digestive problems till a week afterwards. I can't explain why that's my response. It's like, "he's back in my life, so I need to not eat." It just happens.

LEARNING

"Because I am forced to deal constantly with violence and abuse, and possibly with negative responses from others, I experience fatigue and isolation.

Sometimes I cannot help but ignore or avoid activities that could help me learn and develop as a person because of competing priorities related to violence."

There was a lot of time that I had to put into the relationship. I needed to be available all the time. There were times where he would show up at uni and things like that and I just needed to drop everything and be there.

What kinds of things am I having to do, or not do, about my learning and personal growth?

My friendships suffered more so than uni or work, because I love studying more than anything, so I just wasn't willing to not study. But there definitely were times where I had to manage my time a lot more effectively. I definitely didn't have any free time or time to do what I wanted to do or just to go hang out with my friends or anything like that.

LOVE AND CONNECTION

“My family relationships, friends and connections with community, spiritual connection and connections to land may be under threat.

The person committing the abuse may isolate me from those I love and manipulate others against me, and undermine my relationships including my parenting. They may threaten or abuse my children, friends or family, pets, property, and things that are important to me as a means to control me.”

He wanted me to be part of his family and so he didn't want me to have the ties with my family anymore. He was very adamant that I needed to let my mum go and not have as much to do with her, particularly towards the end of the relationship

We got back from Europe, I said, that's it, I don't want to be together anymore. But we still had contact for quite some time after we broke up. Particularly during that time he would say things like, “I'm not the controlling one, your mum is,” and, “I'm not the abusive one, your mum is.” That definitely was really difficult to manage because I live with my mum and I'm best friends with my mum.

A few months after we got back we had a wedding that we were supposed to go to. I said, “well, it's not appropriate, I'm obviously not going to come to the wedding anymore.” He said, “well, my whole family are expecting you, they're going to be so disappointed. I've already said that you're going. They've already paid, you need to be there.” Initially I said, “all right, I'll go, but I'll stay somewhere else, I'll stay on my own.” And then his parents were, “oh, we've already paid for it, just come and stay with us, it's fine. We understand you're not together anymore, it will be okay.”

Part of the reason why I'd stayed in the relationship, even though I knew it was wrong, and the reason why I went to the wedding was because I loved his family and I did feel really part of his family. His family did make me feel very part of their unit. I had never had what I considered to be a “real family unit”. I didn't have a Dad. My parents didn't love each other. I loved feeling like I had a “real family unit” for that period. It was hard to let that go.

So we went to the wedding and I remember his mum making comments the whole night about how we were going to get married. We went to the wedding and we had quite a lot to drink. Anyway, I ended up pregnant after that night.

I didn't realise that I was pregnant for a long time because I didn't really remember that we'd had sex. We'd never had unprotected sex, so I didn't think it was a possibility. I wasn't getting periods anyway because I was so skinny, so I didn't think it was possible.

6 weeks after the wedding he called me to say, “have you had a pregnancy test?” and I said, “it's none of your business anyway, but I haven't been getting

periods. I couldn't be pregnant, I haven't had unprotected sex." He was, like, "yes, you have."

I remember I had a job interview that day and I was really excited about it. So I took the test in the morning, assuming that it was definitely going to be negative, because I was pretty confident. And it was positive. And so then I thought, maybe I had cancer. Mum said to me, "don't call him and tell him, wait till you go to the doctor." I think she was trying to make me feel okay about it for my interview, so she was also like, "maybe it is cancer."

She said to me, "don't tell Dan what the result was." I was, like, "he knows that I'm taking the test today, I can't not tell him." And I did. I called him back to say, "look, it's come back positive, but please don't tell anyone. I'm going to go see a doctor, I'll let you know what happens after that." I had uni first, and then I was going to my interview after, and he showed up to my course at uni to say, "I'm so happy and I've told my whole family and we're all so happy. I'm so happy that we're going to be a family and we'll always be together."

What kinds of things am I having to do, or not do, about my relationships and connections?

When that happened, that was when I did tell some people about the fact that he was abusive. I'd never spoken about it openly with my mum, but I did after that. I also spoke to my best friend. I spoke to my dad, interestingly, because I didn't have a relationship with my dad at all. I called him to say that I needed help.

Because I had the history with my dad, I was so desperate to not bring a child into the same situation that I had been in. That for me was when it started to click together; that it wasn't love.

How am I remaining connected to others and to what I know is right? Even if only in the privacy of my heart and mind?

For the few weeks that I was pregnant, that for me was when I realised the situation that I'd gotten myself into and that I didn't want to bring a child into that. So I decided not to.

For a long time I felt very guilty about the decision that I made in that time, because Dan was really adamant that he really wanted to have the baby. I lied to him in that situation. I told him that I lost it. Mainly because he told everyone and I didn't want everyone to know. I was ashamed. I was a smart girl and somehow, I had ended up in this horrible situation.

That's why it's been so difficult for me, even so many years later, to be angry at him about it, because I still have so much guilt and shame around what happened.

SAFETY

"I don't like what is going on. I am resisting and responding to the abuse, trying to manage it. I didn't attract it, I don't accept it, but I can't stop it."

My safety is compromised, and I may be in danger of physical harm or being injured or killed.”

I didn't talk about it with most people, most people still wouldn't know. My two best friends, and then my friend at work, who only found out because he would contact me at work, are the people that know. I try not to talk about it if I don't have to.

There is no place in a healthy relationship for controlling, abusive and violent behaviour.

I remember feeling like I was drowning. Like he was drowning me. Like I was fighting for air most of the time. Sometimes though, particularly when I wanted to give up, he was also the one that “let me” come up for air. Sometimes now when life is overwhelming and I feel like I'm drowning, I think back to that, to him, like it might be better if I was with him and he'd be able to help me feel better. Like he might be able to help me come up for air. I know that's not the case but it's an interesting association. I wonder when I'll stop thinking that, or if I ever will.

My wellbeing matters to me and this includes my safety.

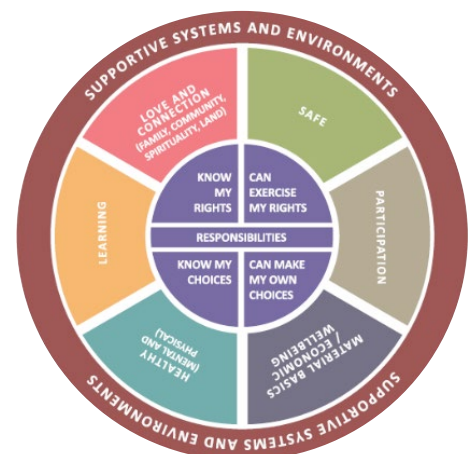
Being 'safe' is more than being physically safe – it includes all aspects of my wellbeing.

Wellbeing includes being able to know and exercise my rights, and choices, and to be able make and act on my own decisions. Wellbeing includes being able to:

- Participate in my community
- Earn an income or access material support
- Maintain my physical and mental health
- Learn and grow as a person
- Connect with friends, family, community, country or faith; and
- Be safe: Physically, financially, emotionally, culturally, spiritually and psychologically.

Each area of my wellbeing will also change over time as my needs, priorities and circumstances change.

The violence I experience can undermine my wellbeing across many areas of my life.



Acknowledgement and thanks

Insight Exchange would like to thank the person with lived experience of domestic and family violence who has generously shared their insights for the benefit of others.

We acknowledge that despite our best efforts to assemble with a person a more accurate representation of some of their experiences of violence, we can never fully understand all that their experiences mean to them now or through their life. We understand that no one's life experience can ever be fully represented in language or any other form.

Handle with dignity

You have been reading carefully assembled excerpts of peoples lived experience of domestic and family violence. These are not simply another 'story', 'sample' or 'case study'.

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Disclaimer:

This My Safety Kit narrative is a carefully assembled excerpt of a person's lived experience of domestic and family violence. Details of this person's identity have been altered to protect their safety. Whilst great care has been taken to do no harm and to contribute to improved understanding of and responses to domestic and family violence, Insight Exchange assumes no responsibility for how the resource is used by other parties.

Further resources and support

My Safety Kit is an Insight Exchange resource for any person who at some point may be reflecting on their own relationships and experiences of domestic and family violence. The resource may also have benefits for people who are:

- Supporting friends and family who are (or might be) experiencing domestic and family violence
- Working as a service responder to people experiencing domestic and family violence

[My Safety Kit](#) includes contact details for services across Australian states and territories that may be able to support a person in their next steps. It is available online at www.insightexchange.net